



Iowa Department of Natural Resources
Solid Waste Permitting
Focus Group Report

April 2004

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INTRODUCTION

- The Iowa Department of Natural Resources' ultimate purpose is the highest possible customer satisfaction with its solid waste permitting process.
- The objectives of this focus group research are to:
 - Determine and compare current levels of satisfaction among:
 - landfill operators and owners who actively communicate with the Department on solid waste permitting issues and
 - landfill operators and owners who seldom communicate with the Department.
 - Utilize this information to identify methods for improving customer service.

INTRODUCTION, con't

- This contract was prepared with funds from the Ground Water Protection Fund. However, any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed herein are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the view of the DNR.

METHODOLOGY

METHODOLOGY:

Overview

- The focus group methodology was selected because it effectively elicits participants' thoughts, feelings, and reactions in a timely, cost-effective manner.
- One focus group representing each of the following was conducted:
 - Owners and operators who frequently communicate with the DNR on permitting issues.
 - Owners and operators who infrequently communicate with the DNR on permitting issues.
- An attempt was made to obtain geographic representation as well as facility size representation.

METHODOLOGY:

Overview, con't

- Group 1 lasted approximately 2 hours. Group 2 lasted approximately 1.5 hours.
- Both groups were facilitated by a skilled focus group moderator.
- The groups were audiotaped and mindmapped.
- The audiotapes and mindmaps were then used to produce this focus group report.

METHODOLOGY:

Focus Group #1

- The “Frequent Communicators” with the DNR focus group was held in Des Moines on Friday, March 5, 2004 from 1:15 pm to 3:15 pm.
- There were 13 participants, representing:
 - The west, northeast, and southeast regions of the state.
 - Small, medium, and large facilities.

METHODOLOGY:

Focus Group #2

- The “Infrequent Communicators” with the DNR focus group was held in Des Moines on Friday, April 2, 2004 from 1:15 pm to 2:45 pm.
- There were 12 participants, representing:
 - The west, northeast, and southeast regions of the state.
 - Small, medium, and large facilities.

FINDINGS:
Focus Group #1

Frequent Communicators
with the DNR

What comes to mind when you think about the permitting process?

- Long turnaround time
- Redundant
 - “Reinventing the wheel” every time.
 - Submitting multiple copies of the same information every three years because staff seem to have no way of maintaining previously submitted information.

What comes to mind when you think about
the permitting process?
con't

- High staff turnover means staff have no prior knowledge of the project and its history.
- Staff seem “disengaged,” sitting in the Wallace Building removed from the project site.

What comes to mind when you think about the permitting process? con't

- Frustration
 - “They don’t meet deadlines, then they give you a deadline.”
 - “It’s a guessing game – they need to be more up front about what they need.”
- Three years is too short a time for permit renewal.

Level of Satisfaction with the Current Process

- 3 participants are very satisfied because:
 - “We’ve taken a proactive approach and gone to the DNR.”
 - “Our last experience was positive – the engineers came to the site and got a visual picture of how the site works.”
 - The process seems to be improving over what it was in the past.

Level of Satisfaction with the Current Process, con't

- Most participants were in the mid-range of satisfaction because:
 - Expectations are inconsistent:
 - They shouldn't vary from site to site, but they do.
 - Depends upon reviewer.
 - Redundancy
 - “What kind of filing system do they have?”

Level of Satisfaction with the Current Process, con't

- Slow response time.
- In the past, reviewers were more knowledgeable. Current reviewers don't seem to understand landfills, what they are, how they're built, how they function.
- Lack of site visits: “You can look at a topographical map all day long and that won't give you the information you need.”

Understanding of the Permitting Process

- Each participant was asked to write down her/his understanding of the steps in the process.
- Results showed that participants' understanding of the process varied.
- A majority of participants indicated that finding out the required steps in the process is a problem.
- Some indicated that Form 50 on the website is not the entire process and they do not know where to go to find out the entire process.

Customer Service: Respect

- Participants were mixed in their perceptions of whether they are treated with respect.
 - “They treat us like we’re doing something wrong.”
 - “You’re more respected if you have a ‘PE’ after your name.”
 - “There’s a swing between, ‘You’re the customer’ and ‘We’re the law.’”

Customer Service: Communication

- Participants unanimously indicated that they are unable to track their application or find out where the application is in the process and what might be the cause of the delay.
- Meetings in Des Moines are unproductive because the agenda is not followed and the applicant's issues do not get resolved.

Customer Service: Communication, con't

- Several participants indicated that the heavy reliance on written communication magnifies their frustration with the process and can easily lead to misunderstandings that escalate into anger.
- They stated that there are fewer problems with personal interactions versus written.

Customer Service: Communication, con't

- Several participants indicated they perceive the written communications to have a condescending tone.
 - “I read the letter 17 times because it makes me angry that they said it like that, in that tone. They need to write the letter as if they expect they’re going to receive the materials.”

Customer Service: Communication, con't

- Several participants indicated that it angers them that the permitting process is so slow and yet the DNR written communications give applicants deadlines in a tone recipients perceive as insulting.
- Some participants indicated that even though they are following the process to the best of their ability, written communication from the DNR can make it look to their Board like they're incompetent.

Customer Service: Communication, con't

- Some participants stated that copies of materials are often sent to the wrong person. This appears to happen especially when a consultant is involved.
- Perception of whether phone calls are returned in a timely matter is mixed.
- Return of emails is generally perceived to be better than phone calls.

Customer Service: Consistency

- A majority of participants indicated that comments frequently seem to be personal opinions rather than a reflection of a rule.
- Accuracy of information is perceived to be inconsistent, depending upon which staff member is contacted.
- Permits appear to sometimes be based not on current rules, but on rules that may be put in place in the future.

Suggestions for Improving the Process: Site Visits

- Participants unanimously and enthusiastically support the idea of site visits including all of the following: engineer, central office, field office, and operator.
- They indicated that the delay caused by the need to schedule the visit by multiple staff people would be more than offset by an overall shortening of the process and a reduction in frustration.

Suggestions for Improving the Process

Site visits, con't

- Schedule the site visits well in advance so all the necessary people can be there.
- Schedule the site visit early in the renewal process, ideally 1 week after the application is received.
- Review prior materials before the visit – concentrate the visit only on what has changed or what is questionable.

Suggestions for Improving the Process

Site visits, con't

- Do the site visit first, then do the checklist.
- Make sure everyone is clear after the visit
 - Discuss any problems or questions.
 - Make sure that only things that have been verbally agreed to show up in the permit.

Suggestions for Improving the Process: Coordination

- Coordinate comp planning and permitting, for example, spend the same day doing the comp plan and permitting.
- Issue a single site permit for all systems. Get centralized knowledge of all permits at each site.

Suggestions for Improving the Process: Communication

- The comment letter ideally should be a phone call or do a phone call prior to the comment letter.
- Assure that the final permit includes only things that have been discussed – currently the final permit may include things that were not talked about.
- Call on the phone rather than email to tell the applicant what is missing from their application.

Suggestions for Improving the Process: Communication

- Change the tone of letters so they are not condescending or implying that the applicant has done something wrong.
- Cite rules rather than personal opinions.
- Develop a one page form for tonnage.
- Participants indicated, when asked, that an application checklist would be beneficial.

Suggestions for Improving the Process: Consistency

- Assure policies and procedures are consistently applied, even when staff changes.
- Base permit decisions on current rules, not anticipated future rules.

Suggestions for Improving the Process: Application tracking

- Participants state that a way to track the status of their application online would be beneficial.
- If online tracking is not possible, the DNR staff should at least let the applicant know what is the cause of the delay of the application – a problem with the application or a DNR process problem.

Suggestions for Improving the Process: Expected Turnaround times

- Participants indicated that these turnaround times would meet their expectations:
 - New design: 6 months
 - Renewal: 60 days
 - Amendment: 30 days

Suggestions for Improving the Process: 5 Year permitting process

- Some participants suggested a 5 year process that would proceed according to the following process and would take one month:
 - Kickoff meeting
 - Site visit
 - What's different
 - Review and comment
 - Final approval

Suggestions for Improving the Process: Applicants' responsibilities

- Participants were asked what they perceive as their responsibility in improving the process. These are their responses:
 - Decrease arguments.
 - When the process doesn't work, give input, instead of agreeing to do it.
 - Walk through the process with staff.

What would *not* improve the process

- Participants were asked if it would be to the applicant's advantage if DNR staff would call ahead of time to let the applicant know the date of the review so that the applicant could be available to answer questions.
 - Participants unanimously stated that there was no advantage in this.
 - Some expressed the idea that expecting the applicant to be available for an entire day is not only impossible, but also shows disregard for demands on the the applicant's schedule.
 - A site visit is much preferred over this option.

What would *not* improve the process, con't

- Participants indicated that the ability to file the application online is not a priority at this time because they doubt the State of Iowa has the ability to support an online system that actually works effectively, given the variability in the types of permits the system would have to handle.
- An ineffective online system is perceived to be more work than a paper system.

Prioritized Suggestions for Improving the Process

- Recognizing that the DNR cannot change the entire process at once, participants were asked to prioritize the suggestions that were made during the focus group.
- The following pages list the group's priorities, from highest to lowest.

Prioritized Suggestions from Highest to Lowest

- 5-10 year permit.
- Focus renewal on what has changed; require submission only of new information.
- Site visits that include all of the following: engineer, central office, field office, operator.
- Accept applications based on current rules.
- Shorten turnaround time.
- Consistently apply policies and procedures to transcend personal opinion.

Prioritized Suggestions from Highest to Lowest, con't

- Checklist of required submittals prior to sending in application.
- Single site permit for all systems.
- Communicate reasons for backlog.
- Draft of permit prior to final permit.
- Change tone of written communication.
- “Decision tree” with dates so can track application status.

FINDINGS:
Focus Group #2

Infrequent Communicators
with the DNR

What comes to mind when you think about the permitting process?

- Long turnaround time.
- Several participants indicated turnaround times are improving, the process has recently been smoother, and that on-site inspections have been part of the process.
- Wondering why process takes so long.
- Many new staff who are not “up to speed.”
- Apparent lack of internal communication among DNR staff (comp planning, field, air, water).

Level of Satisfaction with the Current Process

- Most participants indicated they are “not very” satisfied with the permitting process because:
 - The process is so slow.
 - “If a permit is important, give it credence by having a timely process.”
 - “You shouldn’t be able to operate without a permit, but we do. They don’t take it seriously on their end.”
 - “If we’re a day late, they’re on the phone, but if they’re late, that’s different. What’s good for the goose should be good for the gander.”

Level of Satisfaction with the Current Process, con't

- Several participants were in the mid-range of satisfaction because:
 - Redundancy. Materials already filed should be kept on file. Only new materials should be submitted. DNR loses materials already submitted.
 - The comp plan is tied to the permit and that delays the permit. It's not clear what the State wants from the comp plan.
 - There have been positive changes in the past year, including site visits.

Level of Satisfaction with the Current Process, con't

- One participant was in the “extremely satisfied” range because there is one staff person who is a model:
 - Comes to the site.
 - Asks good questions.
 - Is upfront at the site about what is likely possible or not possible.
 - Sees role as helping and advising.

Level of Satisfaction with the Current Process, con't

- Model staff person, con't
 - If doesn't understand something, immediately calls on the phone for clarification.
 - Bases decisions on whether the issue is sound technology and “will it work?”
 - Makes decisions within 30 days.

Understanding of the Permitting Process

- Each participant was asked to write down her/his understanding of the steps in the process.
- Most participants indicated that the steps in the process are straightforward, it's just that the time it takes to complete the process is a problem.

Customer Service: Respect

- Participants were mixed in their perceptions of whether they are treated with respect.
 - It depends on the staff person.
 - “The customer is not always right.”
 - Some participants indicated they had had intense verbal confrontations with certain staff and had been hung up on.

Customer Service: Communication

- Most participants indicated that part of the communication difficulty has been a heavy reliance on written communication when a phone call could resolve the issue.
- Response was mixed as to whether staff can be reached by phone and whether staff return phone calls.

Customer Service: Communication, con't

- Communication within the DNR itself as well as “politics” between the field office and Des Moines were cited as issues.
- Sometimes staff have to do further research before making a decision. When this is the case, staff should simply tell applicants they need to research it.
- There may be discrepancies between what is perceived to be verbally agreed to and what shows up in the final permit.

Customer Service: Communication, con't

- “They work off the bottom of the pile. If you call with a question, your application goes to the top of the pile and they’ll never get to it. Think twice before you call them.”

Customer Service: Consistency

- Accuracy of information and interpretation of rules are perceived to be inconsistent, depending upon which staff member is contacted.
- Also, the same staff person may change his/her mind several times.
- There appears to be a staff reluctance to make decisions and that slows down the process.

Suggestions for Improving the Process: Site Visits

- Participants indicated that site visits would be beneficial, particularly at the beginning of the process.
- A majority of participants DO NOT want all staff (engineer, central office, field office, and operator) involved in the visit. This majority wants only themselves and the inspector present.

Suggestions for Improving the Process: Site Visits, con't

- Some thought that having too many people involved in the visit would lead to interpersonal conflict - for example, differing opinions by engineers.
- Several participants indicated that having engineers present may cause difficulties, in part because engineers do not understand operations.

Suggestions for Improving the Process: Staff Understanding of Realities

- Several participants indicated that it's important for DNR staff to understand the “real world,” and how factors such as local weather can influence inspections.
- Some indicated that the field office staff have a better understanding of realities than Des Moines office staff because the field offices are closer to the site, however, this appears to vary by field office.

Suggestions for Improving the Process: Staff Understanding of Realities, con't

- One participant talked about how the field office staff will come out and if something is not right, will find out the reason and when it will be corrected. The field office person will then come back in a day or so to see if the problem has been corrected. This approach was viewed positively because it allowed for local realities.

Suggestions for Improving the Process: Staff Understanding of Realities, con't

- Another participant stated, “If someone goes to work for the DNR, they should have to work in a landfill for one year. I would pay half their salary. They need to understand the real world – out of the book is not the way it is.”

Suggestions for Improving the Process: Turnaround times

- All participants enthusiastically supported the idea of a checklist at the site visit so applicants would know what DNR staff are looking for.
- One participant suggested a process in use in another state in which there is a set time limit on applications. If the applicant does not hear back in that time (6 months), the application is assumed to be approved. This would eliminate the uncertainty under which applicants are currently operating.

Suggestions for Improving the Process: Expected Turnaround times

- Participants indicated that a 90 day maximum turnaround time for applications would be acceptable.

What would *not* improve the process

- Participants were asked if it would be to the applicant's advantage if DNR staff would call ahead of time to let the applicant know the date of the review so that the applicant could be available to answer questions.
 - Participants unanimously stated that there is no advantage in this approach.
 - Some participants indicated that someone is already available when the DNR calls.

What would *not* improve the process, con't

- Participants indicated that the ability to file the application online is not a priority because they doubt the State of Iowa has the ability to support an online system that actually works effectively.
- Participants also doubt the State has the ability to institute an effective system whereby applicants could track the progress of their application online.
- “Their current web page is a disaster.”

Suggestions for Improving the Process: Applicants' responsibilities

- Participants were asked what they perceive as their responsibility in improving the process. These are sample responses:
 - “It’s dictated by what they do.”
 - “It would help if we could read their minds.”
 - “We could call them every day and say, “Where’s my permit?””

Prioritized Suggestions for Improving the Process

- Recognizing that the DNR cannot change the entire process at once, participants were asked to prioritize the suggestions that were made during the focus group.
- The following pages list the group's priorities, from highest to lowest.

Prioritized Suggestions from Highest to Lowest

- 90 day maximum turnaround time.
- Consistent interpretation of rules by DNR staff.
- Site visit at beginning of process.
- Improve interdepartmental communication within DNR.

Prioritized Suggestions from Highest to Lowest, con't

- Checklist of what the DNR is looking for.
- Base renewal only on what has changed.
- Call on phone to personally clarify questions.
- Improve database/method DNR uses to keep track of materials already submitted.

CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion 1

- Conclusion 1: Both groups indicate that long turnaround times are a major concern. Ideal turnaround times for renewals are 60-90 days.
 - Recommendation 1A: Continue efforts already in process to reduce turnaround times.
 - Recommendation 1B: Consider expanding the renewal cycle to 5-10 years.
 - Recommendation 1C: Keep applicants informed of the status of their renewal application.

Conclusion 2

- Conclusion 2: Redundancy in the renewal process is a concern.
 - Recommendation 2A: Assess the current record keeping system's capacity to store site documents that do not change so that duplicate submissions are not required.
 - Recommendation 2B: If possible, focus the renewal only on what has changed since the prior permit.

Conclusion 3

- Conclusion 3: Heavy reliance on written communication appears to create misunderstandings.
 - Recommendation 3A: Review the notification letters to assure that the tone is respectful.
 - Recommendation 3B: Consider having a site advisory group that reviews the letters to assure the tone is respectful.
 - Recommendation 3C: Communicate via phone or in person rather than email or letter whenever possible.
 - Recommendation 3D: Include in written communication only issues that have been discussed verbally.

Conclusion 4

- Conclusion 4: Staff vary in their knowledge of landfills, communication skills, ability to treat customers with respect, and in the way rules are applied.
 - Recommendation 4A: Assure all staff are trained in the above areas and that there are current written policies and procedures to provide guidance.

Conclusion 5

- Conclusion 5: Sites' understanding of the steps in the permitting process varies.
 - Recommendation 5A: Assure that the steps in the process are clearly laid out in a document.
 - Recommendation 5B: Consider having a site advisory group that reviews the process for clarity.
 - Recommendation 5C: Institute an application checklist.

Conclusion 6

- Conclusion 6: The reaction to site visits including the engineer, central office, field office, and operator was mixed. The “Frequent Communicator” Group was enthusiastic about the idea while most participants in the “Infrequent Communicator” Group like the idea of site visits, but want only themselves and the inspector present.
 - Recommendation 6A: Implement the site visit process.
 - Recommendation 6B: Consider giving the operator the choice of whom they want to be present at the site visit.
 - Recommendation 6C: Scheduling the site visit should occur early in the application process.

Conclusion 7

- Conclusion 7: There are changes under consideration that *would not* improve the process.
 - Recommendation 7A: The idea of calling ahead to let sites' know the day the application will be reviewed is not perceived as beneficial and should not be implemented.
 - Recommendation 7B: The State of Iowa is not perceived to have the technological capability to develop a user-friendly online application process, so this should not be a priority.